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SOCIAL IDEALS.—I.*

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MRS. WHARTON's remarkable novel is a tragedy. It is a tragedy, not only because it ends with the death of the heroine, but because the heroine loses life's greatest prizes—the true love of a lover and her own self-esteem. She loses what every human soul more or less consciously strives for, a deep and at once concentrated and reciprocated affection of a kindred human being, free from, and above, all worldly and conventional considerations; and she loses this because of conditions which are ephemeral and fortuitous. She also loses the all-pervading moral sense of the harmonious relation between her actual life and the ideal of that life which dominates the soul of every human being with greater or less clearness and consciousness. It is upon this harmony of our moral sense that our self-esteem depends. It is a soul's tragedy. But the essential element in a tragedy as a work of art is that it should force the reader or spectator into sympathy with the fate which is developed before his eyes. This is the true poetic justice in literature; not so much that the guilty should be punished, as that our sympathy and our emotions should be justified by the artistic presentation, the artistic form.

The story of the tragic fate of Lily Bart, living in fashionable New York society, could not evoke our interest, culminating in our sympathy, if the conditions which lead her to her ruin were not clearly impressed upon us by the necessary conditions of her own life and did not in so far "justify" her fate. We cannot sympathize with *Monstra*: they may help to interest us in a spec-

* This essay was suggested by the reading of Mrs. Edith Wharton's "The House of Mirth."

tacular display, but they cannot form the centre of interest in a tragedy which is to move us to sympathy and to pity. Becky Sharp could not for a moment hold our interest in suspense, if the conditions of her breeding and early life, and the circumstances under which, thus prepared, she is placed, did not fully account for, if not justify, her failings, her life, and her deeds. Lily has nothing of the Becky Sharp in her. She is in many respects the very opposite of Thackeray's heroine. She is essentially lovable, good-natured by disposition, beautiful and attractive, and, for the most part, up to the very moment of her tragedy, she is pampered by fashionable society. Her temperament, the inherited traditions of her early life are the opposite of those of Becky. Her great trials came at the end of her life, while those of Becky Sharp came at the beginning. We might almost venture to surmise that, if Lily had begun her life as a poor girl in a boarding-school, she would at once have gained and held the affection or, at least, the unstinted admiration of those about her. And if in her adult existence she had been forced to battle with manifest poverty and had gone through the discipline of earning her own livelihood as a teacher in a school, her whole nature might have developed generously and on large lines. Still, as with Becky, her life is decided by the peculiar influence of her early bringing-up and her later existence upon her elementary personality.

Lily Bart was born into the life of the wealthy merchant class of New York, the daughter of an assertive, worldly and selfish mother who dominated the family life. Her father was a simple business man, unassertive in his home; his main justification for his existence appears to have been to produce the means for the satisfaction of his wife's worldly ambitions. Lily's misfortune, moreover, was her remarkable and effective beauty, destined by its quality to confer upon her preeminence in the social glitter of that wealthy society, which seemed the natural setting or background for her physical attractiveness. With this she possessed a natural taste for dress and the grace of wearing it. In the eyes of the world she was destined to make "a great match." From her earliest days, in her home she has constantly and exclusively impressed upon her the vulgar and hard-hearted ideals (if one dare call them so) of this worldly and restricted society. The subsequent tragedy of her life is prepared when her father

dies after failing in business, and her mother is left alone with her beautiful daughter, her means sorely restricted, while her tastes and ambitions remain unabated. Lily's early girlhood is spent in travelling about, the main object of her mother being to evade, or at least hide, all the struggles to maintain for her brilliant daughter an adequate position in the circles of smart people among whom they both move. The girl has had no opportunity to realize higher and nobler ideals of life; while she has constantly instilled into her, as an almost physical characteristic, the thoroughly ingrained need of elegance and the revulsion from all that is dowdy or inelegant. After the death of her mother, as a beautiful and attractive young lady with good social connections in New York she soon becomes a pampered and prominent figure in the smartest and wealthiest of these sets. She becomes the friend of the wealthy women who set the tone in the luxurious life of the flashy New York *haute finance*—if the term “friendship” can be applied to the shallow and rootless relationship which she holds to her intimates among the women. With her small competence, however, she can only maintain herself properly in this circle by receiving certain indirect additions to her finances from her women friends, for which, without manifest compact, she renders corresponding services of an undefined nature as a kind of social assistant, manageress, mistress of the ceremonies and occasional private secretary without office. In spite of the deeper and nobler qualities in her nature, hitherto dormant, Lily feels herself comfortable in these elegant surroundings; they have become, in fact, almost an essential need of her nature. Moreover, the hard and indelicately clear manner in which, in her mother's home and in her later environment, the mercenary aspect of matrimony and love is regarded has blunted her inherent refinement of mind, if not of heart; so that she clearly faces and accepts the view held by those about her, that her ultimate destiny must be to marry one of the richest men in that circle. As the authoress says of her, when she has escaped from a very “doubtful” position:

“She had rejected Rosedale's suggestion with a promptness of scorn almost surprising to herself: she had not lost her capacity for high flashes of indignation. But she could not breathe long on the heights; there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of

moral strength: what she craved, and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest. Hitherto, her intermittent impulses of resistance had sufficed to maintain her self-respect. If she slipped, she recovered her footing; and it was only afterward that she was aware of having recovered it each time on a slightly lower level. She had rejected Rosedale's offer without conscious effort; her whole being had risen against it; and she did not yet perceive that, by the mere act of listening to him, she had learned to live with ideas which would once have been intolerable to her."

Lily does not marry one of the millionaires, though the opportunities were immediately within her reach, and though she had clearly accepted such a destiny as her natural one. The real cause of this failure gives the key-note of the whole work, cleverly struck at the very beginning of the story—her love for the man who appears above the horizon of the world in which she moves, though he also moves in it with a native refinement and a depth which have withstood its tarnishing and shallowing influences. He despises that world in his heart, though it has certainly affected his life and his fate, if not his character. Of this love, which subconsciously acts as a restraining power and at the last moment prevents her from marrying a millionaire without love on more than one occasion, both he and she only become fully and mutually conscious when the tragedy is almost inevitably approaching its climax.

Meanwhile, the conditions of the social life in which she moves have placed her in a succession of false positions which gradually tend to compromise her in the eyes of even that world. Her finances become involved, she is dropped by most of her "elegant friends," and is reduced to pecuniary straits which force her to give up the luxuries that have become second nature, and bring her to the verge of actual want. Forsaken and alone and almost despised, having sunk gradually from the highest pinnacle of vulgarly manifest smartness, through intermediate "social" stages, to association with people of doubtful respectability, she at last ends her own life just as she realizes what true love means. She does this in a tragically dramatic situation which it would be wrong to forestall in a dry and inadequate paraphrase, and which I must leave the reader to realize for himself in this beautifully written book. The book is in all essentials a tragedy.

In all times, the central and distinctive feature of a tragedy

has been that it represents the struggle of the Individual against the Universal, and that the individual is crushed. This idea of the Universal may be expressed in the form of the Divine Power, the gods, or Fate as decreed by them, or laws created by their sanction, or by Society representing these laws. It is a conflict of the individual against the crushing power of these general forces that constitutes the decisive feature of tragedy with the ancients; the progression from the direct manifestation of the gods to the more human sphere of social laws is marked by the three great tragic writers: *Æschylus*, in whose dramas we more directly feel the intervention of the gods; *Sophocles*, where fate manifests itself in the form of immutable laws; *Euripides*, where the human origin of these laws is more perceptible. This conflict and its tragic end, implying as they do the contravention of the highest social laws, imply some crime or fault or at least mistake on the part of the suffering hero. But, to evoke our sympathy and our pity, the definite contravention must not be an immediate act of his conscious will; but it must be caused by some outer concatenation of circumstances which takes the form of fate from which he cannot escape, some overwhelming passion, justifying the act by its elemental forcefulness, or some mistake of judgment which for the time has blinded the eyes from perceiving and realizing the great general laws. Yet, in the Greek drama, these crimes or passions or errors of the individual tend to confirm the strength and validity of the general laws, they make them appear immutable as rocks upon which the fabric of organized society was erected for the ancient world. Their dramas are thus "*ηθικόι*," moral. Even with the Greeks, however, in the progression I enumerated above, the tendency grows to eliminate the supranatural element in the conception of these general laws; though we must never forget that the supranatural with the Greeks never was fantastic, because their gods and all their mythological conceptions were naturalistic.

In the modern era of the drama, ushered in by Shakespeare, this tendency towards a purely human basis for the events enacted grows constantly more marked. Human society becomes more directly and manifestly the authority for the laws and the forces against which the individual struggles in tragic conflict. At the same time, the "justification," upon which our

sympathy is based, is more and more manifestly to be found in the *character of the hero*. The conflict must be accounted for, dramatically justified, in the character with which the hero is born. And the most noteworthy consequence of these changes is that, in the presentation of the society which produced the general laws, the element of absoluteness, of immutability, which the supranatural element added to the Greek conceptions, is weakened. In Shakespeare, whatever the strength with which he endows the surrounding forces against which the individual character struggles, we have the suggestion that these change and are not absolute, because they have a national and an historical character.

This process from the ancient to the modern drama is thus one of artistic individualization, a general process which we can notice in the development of all arts. In the drama this process applies both to the drawing of character and to the drawing of "society." The finer shading, the emphasizing of individual features, the precision in the expression of attributes, which mark the development of the modern drama, have no doubt been brought about through the instrumentality of the novel, which has accustomed the public to a fuller presentation of character in growth and development, in its relation to surroundings and in the depiction of the various situations.* But if this greater individualization applies to the presentation of character, it also emphatically applies to the drawing of general society and its laws. With the growth and facility of intercommunication between the various nationalities, each nation has become cognizant of the national character of the other countries and distinctly conscious of its own; and this knowledge has become a matter of artistic interest to each. At the same time, the familiarity with the past through the study of history, and the keen interest thus aroused, have created an artistic taste for the apprehension of the distinct characteristics of various periods

* The dogmatic student of "Æsthetics," who takes Lessing's *Laocoön* as his canonical standard, does not always realize how the several arts influence one another. They do this indirectly, in that a certain standard or form of presentation is fixed in the minds of the public by one art, and this modifies the demand with regard to another art, though that art may be based upon different principles and appeal through different organs of sense. I shall, therefore, allow both drama and novel to illustrate my point. Perhaps I ought to remark that, of course, there are other forms of the novel besides the "dramatic novel," but with these I do not deal here.

in man's past. Instead of General Human Society, we thus have French, German, English, American Society, and, moreover, the national society and social atmosphere of one period in these countries, or even the different districts and centres of life within the same community. Balzac does not only depict the society of France in a given period, but he distinguishes between the life of the metropolis and the life of the provinces; Zola gives facts dealing with the French life of the Second Empire as a whole. Anatole France makes the delicate interaction between the contemporary life and social atmosphere of France upon M. Bergeret the centre of his vivid drawing of the inner struggles of a modern scholar. Mr. George Meredith with passionate insistence depicts the conflict between the vividly drawn provincialism of the England of his youth and its hatred of ideas, and the world of wider and deeper ideas and truer feelings which actuate his heroes, and, especially, his heroines. George Eliot, in every one of her stories as well as in her scenes of provincial or clerical life, shows the same conflict, nowhere more dramatically than when the passionate soul of Maggie Tulliver is wrecked by the hard rule of the Mill on the Floss which typifies the provincial conventions of the English country life into which she was born. Gogol, Tourgenieff, Tolstoy, Gorky do the same for Russia. In the best German novels, from Otto Ludwig to Franzen, we have the same central feature of dramatic conflict. From the plays of the elder and younger Dumas down to Pailleron's masterly drawing of the "*Monde où l'on s'ennuie*," we have a process of finer drawing of the "social" background.

This process of individualization as regards the social environment does not end with the nation or period: society as a general power, weighing upon the individual and affecting his fate, becomes attenuated to a class, nay to a "set"; and the "immutable laws" of society more and more tend to become the conventions of a set. The struggle of the individual against the universal is then no longer the struggle of the human heart and of individual life against immutable laws; but against what the actor himself, as well as the audience, may recognize to be *convention*. This forms the key-note to the compositions of Ibsen and his school. The process of differentiation goes still further: general society, which forms the environment to the soul's drama, may be represented by one aspect of modern life,

as with Hauptmann, with Zola, with Norris; it may be a dominant economical movement, the struggle of capital and labor, the establishment of the universal provider in opposition to the small shop, the conditions of the miner, the influence of drink, etc. Nay, the distinct national laws or standards or conventions, such as those of American and European society, may in their complex fusion become a determining factor of general life pressing upon individual life, as with Mr. Henry James the common land of European and American social standards and ideals becomes itself the complex social arena in which the living actors move and struggle in unbloody, but none the less tragic, conflict. In *Aeschylus* we had the struggle against the will of the gods, in Sophocles against the social laws, in Ibsen against the conventions of the day and in Henry James against the confusing complexity of international standards and conventions.

Thus the ruling laws, the social background, the pervading atmosphere in which the life and conflict of the tragic hero are placed, become more and more prominent and more and more manifestly, sensuously drawn; until a great deal, if not a preponderance, of the interest is shifted to the environment, and the individual characters often receive their artistic right of existence because they are the bearers of these corporate entities, of social ideas or forces or movements. Drink or a strike or the problems of transportation become the heroes in the novels and plays of Zola, of Gerhard Hauptmann and of Norris.

The environment, social as well as material, thus dominates, nay even creates, the individual.

Whether it be a mere coincidence or a casual connection or—what seems to me more likely—the result of the spirit of the age, it is in the age of Charles Darwin that the influence of the environment, in essentially modifying, if not in producing, a definite character, is made a distinct literary element. With writers like Ibsen and Zola, the application of these principles of evolution and heredity becomes in artistically manifest and is often obtruded with an amateurish exaggeration and directness. Yet, though the study of evolution and heredity may thus have led to exaggeration and abuse, the modern reading public has not only become prepared to understand most of such influences upon the formation of character, but the knowledge of them has become so familiar and has given such a general tone to the

consciousness of the thoughtful public, that the scientific attitude of mind has indirectly affected the artistic treatment of life. It has been especially active in the dramatic novel. Though, on the one hand, the dramatic conflict lies between the individual, his rights, his passions, his natural interests, and the conventions of a narrow society, the conflict is converted, on the other hand, into a struggle between a "set"-created type, the child of *a* society, and the lasting general human laws —between *a* society and society. Perhaps more accurately defined, the struggle lies between the ideals, the standards or, at least, the aspirations of a narrow society or set and those of human society as a whole. And, when we have to deal with a soul's tragedy, it may often mean the struggle in one and the same individual between the two ideals, the two standards, the two groups of aspirations within it. When at the end the victim realizes that the lower forces have prevailed, then it is a tragedy.

This is the tragic element in Mrs. Wharton's story, as it is in so many noted works in modern fiction. The child's soul is formed and the woman's life is fashioned by the outer social world in which they are placed. We run dangerously near to cant when we say that the most important element in the formation of a character—its education—and the direction of a life's course—its associations and activities—are the ideals which are instilled and the ideals which surround. If we could know the day-dreams of a child—nay, of the grown-up child as well—the part which it imagines itself to play in the world of its desires, the secret ambitions which are hatched in the moments of silent reverie, we should know more about what that child is and what it is to become than by anything said or done, by any effort or achievement.

Now, it is not so much through the channels of the intellect that this fountain of future effort and desire and ambition, which direct the course of the whole life, is fed and courses through our life-blood. It is directly through our emotional nature and our imagination; through what stirs our feelings and appeals to our imagination; through our environment, our home; through our plays and games, physical and moral and intellectual; through what we read—not in connection with work in school hours, but with the relaxation of play and repose that

make the heart sensitive in our leisure hours. Here lies the responsibility of the home, the whole home, not the nursery only, and still less the school. Here also lies the ethical importance of the literature we read,—not so much that it should only deal with nice and brilliant things and people, and avoid the truth of life and the life of common people who are far from brilliant, who may even be vicious; but that the general spirit and moral tone *within the work itself*, and the ultimate ideals dominating the writer himself, which flow into his work involuntarily and give it its elevating stamp, should be moral.

These ambitions of life, these social ideals, are also directly transmitted to the young by those who are about them in their home, those whom they admire and look up to. Yet they are not transmitted directly by preaching, not through the intellect, through the momentary comprehension of the idea itself; but habitually, by continuous repercussion of example, until it pervades the whole surroundings of life, the moral atmosphere, which aesthetically filters through the senses into the emotions, deep down into the character, and gives substance and direction to the imagination. It is what we call the "tone" of a social group and of a home. This tone may be true and noble, strong and refined; or it may be false and ignoble, weak and vulgar. And this tone ultimately derives its character and substance from the morality which is at the bottom of the life, of the ambitions and aspirations, of those who dominate it. I am not using the word "morality" in the restricted sense which we are wont to apply to it nowadays; but as the consciousness of the truest laws which the clearest mind, free from self-deception, can recognize as worthy of ruling the social life of the times in which we live, so clearly perceived that they can be applied to the deepest, weightiest and highest, as well as to the most superficial, lightest and most lowly conditions of our existence. Not the laws of a set, but the laws of society.

Yet the disease which leads to tragic issues is often to be found in the fact that this wide conception of society has degenerated in the minds and hearts of shallow and vulgar-minded people, until its big meaning and purport are entirely lost, and it merely comes to mean the outer tinsel and glittering attributes of a group of wealthy people, who stand prominently before the eyes of the public on a pinnacle of newspaper publicity, in which

their trivial acts and the articles of their apparel are heralded to a gaping and envious crowd. These are the people who then set the "tone" for a whole nation, a tone which reverberates through the streets and slums of cities into the very country lanes, penetrating into the homes of every class, intruding into the harmony of their existence, and often ending in its distant echo with a discord which turns life into low comedy and sometimes into tragedy.

The word "society," which we have hitherto applied in a deeper signification, comes then to stand for what has been called the *Beau Monde* and, as an adjective, *mondain*, worldly, fashionable. We meet it in literature in the phrase "a woman of fashion" and "a man of fashion." We feel a kind of hesitation in dealing seriously with such a condition of things; there is even a kind of self-deceiving insincerity which leads us to deny, or, at all events, to ignore, the existence of such a definite force in actual life. Why is this? Why does our taste revolt against dealing with it explicitly, as if we felt it to be something indelicate? Perhaps it is that we feel we are offending against our sense of proportion by fixing and confirming, by giving substantial weight to, something that is evanescent and immaterial and illusory. We may rightly feel that its power mainly consists in the recognition which it receives; and that the only way not to confirm it, is to ignore it, instead of endowing it with serious existence by such notice. And, all the time, those who observe life must realize that this idea of society is a power, a great power, to the vast mass of people.

In older days, when there were no railways and telegraphs and no newspapers, the *monde* was small and more confined in its recognizability and influence than it is now. The capitals, London itself, were comparatively small, and the Courts dominated the life of the capitals more directly with contiguous ascendancy. The Counties had more material social solidarity, and the leading gentry there danced complacently to their own established good tone. There was more marked exclusiveness, and therefore less interference, between the different circles, and more internal repose. This compact internal social life did therefore not become cognizant to any marked degree of its external appearance, or, at all events, it remained indifferent to it; and thus standards of a more inward and higher character

could become fixed within its body. All this has been changed through the growth in size of the social centres, through facile intercommunication and transportation. All boundaries have been broken through. There are so many "tones" that their complexity produces a confused noise, and no one is dominantly recognizable. Two forces alone have remained to give dominance to the tone of "fashionable society": money and the press.

There is an old German saying that two things cannot be hidden, wealth and poverty. Great wealth can certainly make itself seen and heard and by some means or other attract the eyes, and more than the eyes, at great distances. The brilliancy which it can bring in its train can be transmitted from one distant country to the other; homes can be established, entertainments given, prominence bought. And then comes the press to help it, and its dazzling effects are sent, as it were, by wireless telegraphy into the homes of even the humblest *bourgeois*. And behold! the tone is set which may affect the life of the homes and the imagination of the pure child that lives in them! This becomes a force, a great force affecting the life of a whole nation—the nation's ideals. The writer was told by one of the leading representatives of politics in the United States, when he had just returned from an extensive tour of public speaking, that he found it hard to arouse enthusiasm for, or even interest in, the important questions he wished to bring before the people; that, even in small towns in the Far West, the newspapers would devote but little space to the account of such political discussions, while they devoted columns to the narrative of Newport doings: who was present at the X's dinners and the Y's dance and the Polo match, and what the people wore.

Now, this "society," this *beau monde*, which has replaced the deep conception of society in setting the standards and laws of civilized communities, as Mrs. Wharton describes it in New York, exists everywhere. It is no longer beautiful with the background of chivalry; it is essentially vulgar in its taste and in its influences. The tone is illiterate and uninteresting; there is only the brilliancy of wealth and the glitter of jewels. What there is of ingenuity is to be found in devising new and splendid forms of entertainment; and herein the native inventiveness manifests itself in ministering to the pampered palates of those

who have an insatiable hunger for entertainment. But this entertainment is always *mouvementé*, never reposeful, never calculated for people when they are alone or in smaller groups. There is manifest in the life of these people the hypertrophy of the gregarious instinct; there is no time allowed in the programme of such house parties for restful seclusion with a book or a lonely walk or ride; only, perhaps, in the hours of the morning, when the women rise late and the men rush off to Wall Street, is there seclusion and peace. The presence of Wall Street is felt permeating the whole,—the most brilliant of *fêtes champêtres*, a cruise on the wide expanse of sea, a ride through country lanes. Though Mrs. Wharton has with delicacy shrunk from obtruding it grossly, she has made use of it in the fate of her heroine in a complicated and dramatic situation. Nor has she entered into the doubtful processes of financial enterprise and promotion which permeate this world of Wall Street and often bring us near the border-land of Queer Street, if not of criminality. But in reading the book we feel in the back of our heads the possibility of a state of affairs which the recent revelations in the management of Life-Insurance Companies have actually shown to enter into the sphere of these most prominent leaders of New York "fashionable life."

Yet all this is kept apart, as much as is possible, from the actual domestic and social life of these rich people. The highest qualities there attained to are those of comfort and elegance and luxury. These are the gods whom they worship. And thus the brilliancy of their appearance is made manifest to the widest public in the streets, and through the press reports of their internal gatherings they rise in dazzling splendor and brilliancy before the impressionable eyes of the world outside and leave a stamp upon the desires and ambitions of thousands of girls and women. These influences distorted the nature of Madame Bovary as a girl and led to her tragic doom, as they fascinated as a child the heroine of Daudet's "*Fromont Jeune et Risler Aimé*," drawing her to the gilt railings of the gate leading into the splendid "hotel" of the rich, and eating her heart out in covetousness as she dreamt of the luxury within.

CHARLES WALDSTEIN.

(*To be Continued.*)